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ABSTRACT

The collaborative student essay invites exploration of various points of view in multiple voices. The co-written essay brings out language's heteroglossic richness, as shown by the students' collaborative writing experiences in a college writing class. Students worked within the frames of two assignments: (1) an analysis of a text or trend; and (2) an exploration of a minority group to which none of the writers belonged. Because the latter assignment required interviews, it involved dialogue not only between the members of the co-writing group, but between the group and interviewees. In response to questionnaires, the students projected a view of voice as static and best not changed. When asked to socially create or alter their knowledge, and with that their voices, students felt dissatisfied. The students disliked exploratory essays because the essays did not require writers to support a single point of view, but rather to explore multiple approaches to an issue. Because they felt oppressed by the multiple voices, the students often rejected essay form in favor of a research paper approach with a dull academic voice. The intensity of co-writing awakened students to a different view of voice. Students noted the need to consider others' views and to investigate their own thinking processes. (SG)

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Voice and the Collaborative Essay

"I hate collaboration!" Laura says as she sweeps into my office, "Jack never wants to compromise. Janet writes too generally and I like specifics. Bill won't say anything. I don't know what to do. I hate collaboration!" she repeats, this time on her way out.

In the 2 1/2 semesters that my students have practiced co-writing, most have felt, at some point, as Laura did that day last spring. Writing essays together is an uncomfortable, maddening, process at times; first of all, a writer must share power and authority in an interdependent relationship--power she is used to having all to herself. All sorts of forces are in tension: the group versus the individual, consensus versus difference, the drive to explore diverse points of view versus the drive for closure. My experience suggests that although collaborative essay writing highlights these tensions, leaving students distressed at times, the process of negotiating everything from world views to points of style not only presents a healthy intellectual challenge, but is essential to the growth of individuals and the communities to which they belong. Collaborative writing helps students discover dialogue as the medium of learning, of personal development, of continual transformation. And this dialogue brings forth issues of authority, of hierarchy, of personal voice: tough issues.

And so I've asked my students to write collaboratively.

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But that isn't all--I've also asked them to do this writing in the form and spirit of the exploratory essay. Whereas collaborative writing invites--or rather, forces--co-writers to engage in dialogue, that dialogue would never make it to the written page in the traditional thesis-support form, which encourages a monological voice: a voice that tells its readers its "truth". The essay form invites the exploration of various points of view in multiple voices and thus coincides with the dialogical spirit of collaborative writing.

Bakhtin, whose assumptions about the dialogic nature of language shape my study, sees voice--and with it, human consciousness--as continually in flux. The individual develops by listening to the various voices in society; some voices remain "externally authoritative" (they hold power over the person but remain distanced and unchangeable, like Sacred Writ) while others become "internally persuasive" ("retelling a text in one's own words, with one's own accents gestures, and modifications" (Bakhtin 424). Bakhtin describes the continual flux of discourse between externally authoritative and internally persuasive as "heteroglossia".

Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, in Singular Texts/Plural Authors ask a provacative question: what is the best way to "help students recognize and build upon the Bakhtinian heteroglossic understanding of language?" Which is the better collaboratiave writing assignment: "one that strives to confront language in all its heteroglossic richness or one

that helps students learn how practically and efficiently to get the job of collaborative writing done?" (121). I would choose the first alternative--though the two are not mutually exclusive--and I think that the assignment that best brings out language's "heteroglossic richness" is the co-written essay.

In the time that remains I am going to relate some of my students' experiences and reflections on co-writing essays in my college writing class--one section last spring, two this fall--and show how they confronted the challenges of dialogue as it revealed knowledge and voice in a new, non-foundationalist, non-positivistic light--an often disturbing light. The students worked within the frames of two collaborative essay assignments: an analysis of a text or trend (for example, the television shows "Married with Children," and "The Simpsons" and trends such as teenage alcoholism and suntanning) and an exploration of a minority group to which none of the writers belonged (sample topics are Spanish Americans, homosexuals, and--here's a group desperate to be different--satan worshippers). The second assignment, which required interviews, thus not only involved dialogue among the members of the co-writing group, but between the group and the people they interviewed. The data I'm using come from the essays themselves, process notes students wrote while working on the projects, and questionnaires they completed during the process and at the end.

First, it is important to note that my research, along with Kim's [co-panelist, Kim Hicks], suggests that student's views of voice and the process of knowledge-making differ considerably from the Bakhtinian model. In response to questionnaires, my students projected a view of voice--and, linked to that, one's opinions, ways of viewing the world--as static and best not changed. Ellen--whose group chose to analyze the abortion issue, on which they disagreed--writes, "we all work great together and don't try to change each other's views." Janet, discussing voice as reflected by style on the page, writes "I learned that I have a very specific style and I am very stubborn when it comes to changing my style." Bob refers to how his group's essay on condom use changed from "number facts" to "personal facts." The comments of my students, both in writing and in person, convince me that on the whole they draw a heavy line between what they consider "fact" and "personal opinion." Yet both seem to be static, fixed entities in their minds and so, when asked to socially create or alter their knowledge, and with that their voices, my students felt dissatisfied.

Why did they feel dissatisfied? I think my students--like most of us--grew up on the thesis-support model of writing, the goal of which is to convince an audience that we are right, and, as William Zieger writes, "--to stop inquiry rather than to start it" (456). This model thus supports a view of knowledge as having a solid, unchangeable foundation--whether in scientific fact or personal opinion. Because the

exploratory essay does not require the writer to support a single point of view, but rather to explore multiple approaches to an issue, the writer, along with the reader, comes to see thought as an on-going process, not as an endeavor ending in closure and stasis.

The power of the product-oriented, efficient approach to collaborative writing many students felt was evident in the complaints they had about the project. Here are some sample comments. Bill: "Collaboration does bring out ideas, too many ideas, and when we have too many ideas, we start to write of [of] the subject." Linda: "With all the time it took to share ideas and try to revise something with everybody's approval, I could have written a couple...papers." Rebecca: "I think I like individual essays better because you don't have to work as much. You can jsut sit down and write."

Joe, writing after his group had finished their essay on advertising, notes, "We were worried about just getting the damn thing done, so I think it came out rather bland, like cereal with no raisins or sugar or anything. We wanted it done so it could be passed in, so it came out heavy on the 'facts' side and lacked the flair of color and life that creativity brings." Joe's experience was typical of more than a few of the groups: because they felt oppressed by the multiple voices, they ended up rejecting the essay form and stuck with a research-paper approach with a dull academic voice--a voice that fits the product-oriented, not dialogical mode since it favors consensus and a thesis-support set-up.

And yet, the collaborative set-up forced discussion even when students were feeling time constraints. Steve, noting his group's tendency to procrastinate, says "But when we were pressed for time we always seemed to have a clashing of ideas. The fact that when we had no time to discuss the different approaches to our topic but always found ourselves doing so heatedly assured me that everyone has a different thought pattern."

My research, and Kim's, suggests that the intensity of co-writing, uncomfortable as it may be at times, does awaken students to a different view of voice, to heteroglossia. While my students dislike what they view as the inefficiency of collaboration and value their voices, seeing them as fixed and best left unchanged, when asked what they learned about themselves as writers through co-writing, most said they learned the necessity of taking into account the views of others. They also cited this necessity when I asked what they found most useful about co-writing. Monica, for example, writes, "Collaboration brings out ideas and enhances my thinking process. This occurs because when one person has an idea or suggestion, I investigate it and try to discover if I agree or disagree. . . Collaboration forces everyone to express themselves by trying to reason with other group members". Linda notes, "While a lot tougher, it taught me to think and accept different views and angles on the subject matter. I have been so used to seeing and writing about things the same way. Writing and sharing ideas with others

opened up a new way of writing with me". And another student: "Prior to the collaborative essay I usually only approached an idea from one direction even though I acknowledged the other ways. Through this essay I have learned to combine ideas and show more than one viewpoint in an essay and still have it be coherent".

In theory collaborative essay writing sounds simple: students discover the contextual, shifting nature of voice and knowledge by engaging in dialogue and allowing that dialogue to be reflected in the essay form. My idea was that mostly the discourses that were internally persuasive to all members of the group (after debate) would make it into the essay, except when differences could not be resolved--then the differences themselves could be analyzed. This way, as John Trimbur writes, consensus would be an ideal goal pushing dialogue to take place, but difference would have a voice, too ("Consensus and Difference..."). Naturally, this ideal balance was hard to reach with flesh-and-blood students who had power and ability differences to deal with. I'm now going to give you the experiences of two co-writing groups who were challenged by the authority inherent in certain voices.

One group consisted of two men, who happened to be very assertive and confident, and two women, who tended to be passive. They decided to analyze the popularity of the television show "The Simpsons" and soon discovered that while the men enjoyed the show, the women did not. In conference, after they had produced a rough draft, I encouraged them to

explore this differnce in their essay--was it a matter of gender? taste? expectations about what entertainment should be? I wanted them to find the source of this difference, since they obviously could not persuade one another to change their opinions.

In the final draft, I found the men's position clearly identified and supported with examples from the program. However, when it came time for the women's position to be explained, this is what I read: "Many people can't grasp the humor in something like this, but it is truly there" and "On the other hand, some are not so entertained with the Simpsons. While they don't dislike the show many do not grasp the humor and can not relate to the characters." After the women are cited as not seeing the humor but finding "only the ridiculous behavior in the show," instead of seeing the women's position then supported, I read, "it is this behavior that enhances the program." Clearly the women's voices were undermined here, and an essay that seems exploratory on the surface is really one-sided, closed to different voices.

Another group, doing the assignment to explore a group to which none of them belonged, chose to interview members of the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Association on campus. Unlike the "Simpsons" group, their difficulty was a <u>lack</u> of conflict among group members. All three were self-described "homophobics," and in their conference with me it was clear that the authoritative voices in society condemning homosexuality had become internally persuasive to these

students. I was interested to see what effects the voices of the homosexuals they interviewed would have on their thinking. The essay that resulted was rather confusing, vividly illustrating the clash of external and internally persuasive discourses. In the beginning, their aim is to show their feelings about homosexuals before the interview, giving full play to their individual voices; for example:

"Jane felt that what the LGBA stands for is wrong. It is backwards and perverse. Both Jane and Frank feel that the world would be a better place if homosexuals would have stayed in the closet...Mary is a little more sympathetic toward the group. She felt that they are a part of society, they are human beings, and they deserve rights...She does think, however, that....there is something 'abnormal' about people who stray from the intended nature of human beings."

The first thing that strikes me--after the offensiveness of the comments--is the mixed up past and present tenses, indicating conflicting voices within the writers. They're trying to say that they used to feel this way, yet their language reveals otherwise. Then, they cite the challenging discourse of the LGBA members, without giving their own opinions or reactions. They do, however, respond to some written sources, such as one author who said homophobic individuals "sometimes fear a latent homosexuality in themselves." The group's response? "We don't agree because

we are positive that no homosexual feelings dwell within us."

The views of this group were clearly reinforced rather than challenged because the only disagreements came from without the group, not from within, where they would have had to be hashed out as they wrote the essay. This group, because they agreed, was able to react as an individual writer would to a challenging discourse--by disregarding the discourse. Naturally, if members of their group did not agree with their views they would have been much more challenged to question them. Yet even when students choose to disregard an outside discourse, collaboration forces them to at least listen to the voices and see how they are reacting. For example, one of the members of this group writes that as a result of collaboration she learned "As a writer I find that I am iron in my views! I like to stay on the ground and argue my point until its death."

My research in collaborative essay writing has shown me that while the process is messy and time-consuming, the clashes of discourse engendered by this process left the students more aware of voice than ever before. Suddenly they saw up close the differences among their voices and how their voices could change (often despite their most stubborn intentions) by really listening to and seriously considering foreign discourses. This sort of listening and consideration, in many cases, would not have taken place without the intensity of a co-writing situation. Bakhtin describes voice as being in perpetual flux--whenever you hear

or speak, your voice undergoes change. But this change, I think, is so subtle that it is hard to identify (hence the view of many of my students that ideas and voice are static). Collaboration takes a normally undramatic struggle among discourses and puts it under a spotlight, helping students to see a struggle that otherwise goes unnoticed.

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